Unit .33

Session .01

The Church Is United in the Essentials

Scripture

Acts 15:1-11,14-21

1 Some men came down from Judea and began to teach
the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the
custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved." **2** After
Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and
debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to
go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue.
3 When they had been sent on their way by the church, they
passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in
detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great
joy to all the brothers and sisters. **4** When they arrived at
Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles,
and the elders, and they reported all that God had done
with them. **5** But some of the believers who belonged to the
party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary to
circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of
Moses." **6** The apostles and the elders gathered to consider
this matter. **7** After there had been much debate, Peter stood
up and said to them, "Brothers, you are aware that in the early
days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the
Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. **8** And
God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving
them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. **9** He made
no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts
by faith. **10** Now then, why are you testing God by putting
a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor
we have been able to bear? **11** On the contrary, we believe
that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the
same way they are." ... **14** Simeon has reported how God first
intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name.
15 And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is
written: **16** After these things I will return and rebuild David's
fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, **17** so
that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord— even all the
Gentiles who are called by my name— declares the Lord who
makes these things **18** known from long ago. **19** Therefore,
in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those
among the Gentiles who turn to God, **20** but instead we
should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols,
from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been
strangled, and from blood. **21** For since ancient times, Moses
has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every
Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues."

Intro Options

Main Point:
Salvation is through faith alone.

Option 1

Break your students into several smaller groups. Each group should now come with a dream adventure trip. This could be a trip going anywhere or even any time; they could kayak down the Grand Canyon, they could travel back in time to spend a week with the dinosaurs; they could go somewhere in a science fiction universe.

Once they have decided on an adventure they want to go on, they should come up with two preparation lists. They should first make a list of essentials: things that must go on the trip with them (food, dinosaur-proof armor, gasoline, etc). Their second list should be optional things; these would be things they'd like to take along, but are not absolute essentials. Then let them share their adventures and their lists. What criteria helped them figure out what was essential and what was not?

In today's lesson, we'll see that in the grand adventure of Christianity, the core essential is that we are [redacted] virtually everything else would go on the non-essential list. Yes, those things are [redacted] of the things on the adventurers' non-essential list were important, but only salvation by faith is essential.

In a large group, ask your students to come up with a list of things that are made up of numerous parts. For example: a car, a band, a computer, etc. Once you've got your list, break your students into pairs or trios and assign each group one item from the list. Their job is to figure out what the absolute essentials are for their item: if you start taking parts away, when is the item no longer the item?

For example, if you take the wheels off a car, it's still a car, but if you see an engine by itself, that's not a car. So, how much can you take off a car and it still be a car? How much can you take off a computer and it still be a computer? Give them some time to consider their particular item and then have them share their decision. If you have time, you could do the reverse exercise: how much can you add to something and it still be that thing? For example, if you add wings to a car, is it still a car? If you add rooms and beds, is it still a car, or is it an RV?

As you can see from this exercise, everything has a point at which it is no longer identifiable as itself. It doesn't matter if it's a car, a computer, or an RV. The same is true for Christianity. What can we take away from Christianity and still have its essence? How much can you add before it becomes something else altogether? In today's session, we'll see the early church wrestle with this very issue when men from Judea begin telling Gentile Christians that they needed to obey the law of Moses to be saved. The apostles affirm the truth that has always been the core of Christianity: we are saved by faith alone.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 15:1-5

Gentiles throughout the Roman world had been turning to God through Paul and Barnabas' missionary travels. The missionaries returned to Antioch with a great report. But men from Judea came to Antioch and taught the Gentile believers that they had to be circumcised in order to truly be saved. This is the exact same issue that caused Paul to write the epistle to the Galatians. Having just witnessed God's saving power among the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed the idea that Gentiles had to become externally Jewish in order to belong to the Jewish Messiah and covenant people. When it became obvious that the argument would not be resolved, they journeyed to Jerusalem to settle this issue once and for all.

- **What can you learn from Paul's courage to stand for what was right? What can you learn from his willingness to take the problem to a higher authority?**

We should always stand for what is right, especially when others are at risk of being harmed, as the Christians in Antioch were. But some issues are too big for us to handle ourselves. We may face situations where we know the right answer but don't know how to resolve the situation. We need to know our limits and seek help when necessary.

- **What are some situations where you should seek the help of an authority figure in your life instead of trying to handle it on your own?**

We have a tendency to try to handle things on our own, but it is wise to seek the counsel and support of the authorities God has placed in your life. You may have a disagreement with a friend or sibling you cannot resolve; seek the help of your parents or a leader you trust. When other people are being mistreated, it is good to stand up for them in the moment, but you should also seek the help of an authority figure for a long-term solution. Paul and Barnabas were right about the Gentile believers in Antioch, but they were also wise to go to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem so that the matter could be settled for the whole church.

Read Acts 15:6-11, 14-18

Have you ever been in a heated discussion where one person is sitting there quietly for most of the conversation, and when they've heard enough, they decide to interject with wisdom? Or even better, those who've been going at it look at the person who has been silent like, "Well, what do you think? You haven't said much." That's how I picture Peter at the Jerusalem council—patiently waiting for his opportunity to speak with clarity and wisdom. When he does, he reminds them of the time he led Cornelius to Christ and how God saved him, not by Cornelius becoming externally Jewish, but by grace and on the basis of faith.

- **Why did Peter say Gentiles do not have to become externally Jewish to be saved?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Salvation is through faith alone.

Acts 15

15:1-5. "The idea that God had granted Gentiles 'repentance that leads to life', without becoming Jewish proselytes, seemed to have been settled by Peter's reflection on the Cornelius incident (11:18). But clearly some Jewish Christians were not persuaded and were insistent that circumcision and all that it entailed was necessary for eternal salvation. 'The issue in chapter 15 is thus not merely post-conversion behaviour but what constitutes true conversion in the first place.'"[2]

15:1. "They were telling Gentile converts that faith in Jesus was not enough, not sufficient for salvation: they must add to faith circumcision, and to circumcision observance of the law. In other words, they must let Moses complete what Jesus had begun, and let the law supplement the gospel. The issue was immense. The way of salvation was at stake. The gospel was in dispute. The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined."[1]

15:14. "James used the word laos to describe the Gentiles, a term usually applied to Israel. In Zech 2:11 (LXX 2:15), the Septuagint also applies the term laos to the Gentiles who will in the final days come to dwell in the new Zion and be a part of God's people. Something like this seems to be the meaning here. In Christ God brings Jew and Gentile together into a single laos, a single people 'for his name.'"[3]

15:16-17. "Jesus came into the world and began to gather a true believing remnant of Israel. First there were 12 apostles; then there were 5,000 converts in Jerusalem. And so it spread as God began to fulfill his promise to rebuild the dwelling of David and repair the ruins of his people. Then James goes on in verse 17 and says that the purpose of these rebuilt ruins was not to horde the blessing of God but to make a way for the rest of men to seek the Lord, specifically, all the Gentiles who are called by the name of the Lord."[4]

1. John Stott, The Message of Acts (Bible Speaks Today) (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990).
2. David G Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC)) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).
3. John B. Polhill, Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary), vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011).
4. John Piper, "Rebuilt Ruins Will Reach the World," Desiring God, September 28, 1987, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/rebuilt-ruins-will-reach-the-world.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 80, DDG)

Justification by Faith

Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively declared righteous before God based on the righteousness of Christ's atoning death (Rom. 8:33-34). This act of declaration takes place through faith in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort (Eph. 2:8-9). Through justification, a person is made to be in right standing before God, changing what was once an estranged and hostile relationship to one of adoption into the family of God.

TEACHING PLAN

Peter gives three reasons for why Gentiles do not have to become Jewish in order to belong to the people of God (like they would have had to under the old covenant). First, God gave the Holy Spirit to Gentiles as evidence that they are truly saved apart from becoming Jewish (Acts 15:8). Second, God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles; rather, God cleanses us all by faith (Acts 15:9). Third, Jews themselves are not even saved by their external adherence to the law, for even Jews are saved by the grace of God alone (Acts 15:10).

- **What does James teach about who can be saved in these verses?**

Jesus reestablished the Davidic throne (Acts 15:16). With the coming of King Jesus, the "rest of humanity may seek the Lord" (Acts 15:17), but they may do so without first becoming Jewish. They only need to respond to the gospel in faith (Acts 15:7–11).

Read Acts 15:19-21

With the main theological concern resolved, the council gave Gentile believers four practical requirements to help them live in harmony with Jewish Christians. The prohibitions focus on practices associated with idolatrous lifestyles. The council's point in giving these prohibitions was not to add to the gospel, but to remind us that when we are saved by faith in Jesus, our lifestyles will change in response.

- **If you have trusted in Jesus, how should your life look different than other people your age?**

The prohibitions also instruct Gentile Christians how to be sensitive to Jewish cultural taboos in order to maintain fellowship in diverse congregations. James wanted Gentile Christians to be sensitive to Jewish believers sensitivities in order to maintain unity (see Romans 14:13–18). Also, he adds the line about Moses being read in every city (Acts 15:21) as a reminder that they still want Jews to come to Christ throughout the Roman world. Gentile Christians should be mindful of their lifestyles in order to leave the door open to win others to Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-20).

- **What are some things we do that might be a stumbling block for others? How might we apply the spirit of these instructions today?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Salvation is through faith alone.

Acts 15

15:19-21. "As Christians wrestled with the question of the law's ongoing relevance and application, reflecting on Christ's own teaching and the events by which he inaugurated the New Covenant, there was need for sensitivity and generosity on all sides. Luke goes on to record that Paul was later willing to circumcise Timothy 'because of the Jews who lived in that area' (16:1–3). This narrative is linked to the report that Paul and Silas traveled from town to town, delivering the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey (16:4). Both activities seem to reflect a common concern not to offend Jews unnecessarily, so that the gospel may have free course in their midst (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19–23)."[5]

"True freedom is, then, the exact opposite of what many people think. It is not freedom from all responsibility to God and others, in order to live for myself. That is bondage to my own self-centeredness. Instead, true freedom is freedom from my silly little self, in order to live responsibly in love for God and others."[6]

Activity

Brainstorm with your group two lists: the first list should be common objections people have to Christianity; the second should be things with which Christians themselves struggle in faith. There may be overlap on the two lists. For example, some folks might say that Christians are mean or hypocritical; others might say they find it hard to believe in evolution over creation, etc.

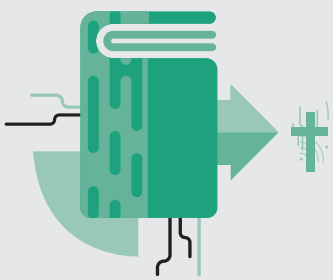
Ask your students to get into pairs or trios and have each group take one of the difficulties you came up with. Today's session was about how the core essential of Christianity is that we are saved by trusting Jesus. With that idea in mind, ask them how they would counsel someone struggling with the issue they have. For example, the creation-evolution battle is important, but it's not core to Christianity; where we go for eternity is not based on whether we were creationists or evolutionists, but on whether we trusted Jesus as Lord.

Come back together and let them share their thoughts. Acknowledge that people's difficulties are real and important, but most of them don't get at the core issue: trusting in Jesus alone. In fact, many of these issues can be resolved (if not answered) by trusting in Jesus.

5. David G Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC)) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).
6. John Stott, The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 1995).

(p. 82, DDG) Christ Connection

The Jerusalem council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: was faith in Christ sufficient for justification and inclusion into God's family, or was something else needed? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for justification. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved.



LESSON 96: INITIATIVE
UNITED IN THE ESSENTIALS

Acts 15:1-11, 14-21

UNITED IN THE ESSENTIALS

Salvation is through faith alone.

JESUS CONNECTION

A dispute arose in the early church: was faith in Christ enough to be accepted as God's child, or was something more needed? Church leaders agreed that faith in Jesus' death and resurrection is all that is needed for each sinner to be saved from sin and declared "not guilty" before God.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

INITIATIVE – Recognizing and doing what needs to be done without being asked.

HEAD

What teaching about salvation was dividing the church? How did they address the problem?

What instructions were given to new followers of Jesus?

HEART

The early church took the initiative to address the conflict instead of trying to ignore it. When is it most difficult for you to take initiative? Why?

Jesus took the initiative with us: He left Heaven and came to us, taught and showed us what God is like, died on the cross for our sins, rose again and appeared to many, went back to Heaven to prepare a place for His followers and sent the Holy Spirit to live in His disciples. How does remembering what Jesus did motivate you to take initiative?

HANDS

Initiative isn't just doing what we say we will do. Initiative is seeing whatever needs done or needs to be dealt with and diving in to address it. How could you show initiative in these scenarios?

- When sitting down to eat, you grab the last clean fork from the drawer.
- After a disagreement, your friend hasn't spoken to you for nearly a week.
- The LifeWise teacher challenges you to read the whole book of John this month.